

Part II

“Fearful ascendancy”: Women Periodical Literary Reviewers

Part One explored essays in which women critics presented literary works as part of the nation’s cultural heritage. Among other concerns, the two chapters examined these writers’ views on the interplay between literature and the wider culture, with special emphasis on the role of the discourse of sensibility in shaping critical standards and conceptions of British national identity. In the process, they revealed these critics’ understanding, even endorsement, of the power and influence of popular literary forms such as drama, the familiar essay, and the novel. This section examines British women’s criticism of the most contemporary publications, looking at how a specific subculture facilitated women’s commentary on literature. Examining anonymous periodical literary reviewing by women writers clarifies how it was possible, for the first time in the history of British letters, that women were able to break into a profession that until then had been the preserve of men. In their positions as reviewers, these women gained a remarkable degree of influence.

Literary reviews appeared as an innovative form during the second half of the eighteenth century, a time when Britain saw a rapid increase in both literacy and the volume of new publications. Periodicals commenting on literature had for some time enjoyed great popularity and influence, but with an expanding reading public eager for guidance on the mushrooming numbers of new books, the time was ripe for publications devoted exclusively to making sense of all the new publications. Educated professionals expected to keep up with advances in all branches of science and the arts, while the rising middle classes wished to attain the sort of general familiarity with literature that was quickly becoming a necessary mark of status. First conceived in the mid-eighteenth century, literary reviews came to

dominate the practice of literary criticism by the beginning of the nineteenth century, determining the shape of Romantic-era popular literary taste. They enjoyed wide readerships, and they transformed this new and diverse audience into consumers of the public conversation about literature and culture. The commentary they supplied educated large numbers of readers whose formal training in literary values was often modest at best. Not only private book purchasers, but reading rooms and circulating libraries in England and throughout Europe and the colonies depended on reviews in publications such as the *Monthly Review* and the *Critical Review* to determine what new books to order. In James Basker's assessment, literary journalism

introduced new, more accessible forums for critical discussion; it multiplied and diversified the opportunities for critical expression; it fostered new critical values, drew attention to new literary genres, systematized the treatment of established ones, and expanded the audience for criticism. [...]n subtler ways it affected canon formation, reception history, the emergence of affective criticism, the assimilation of foreign influences, the segregation of 'women's literature', and ultimately the politics of culture.¹

These are vast claims, but it seems that some were not only conscious of their truth but concerned about the consequences. By 1811 a distressed Josiah Conder complained of literary reviewers that "The fearful ascendancy they have gained in the literary world, their extensive and powerful effects on individual character and public opinion, and their consequent importance as a moral and political engine, must awaken the jealous attention of the statesman as well as the philosopher."² Accessible to many who had little access to formal education, reviews had taken over from schools and academies much of the role of educating not only the nation's literary taste, but its opinions on the full range of public issues.

The new reviews had other profound effects on culture as well. By offering writers plentiful opportunities for paid work and provided a venue where they could hone their critical and creative skills, they helped drive the shift during late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries from an amateur literary culture grounded in patronage to a professional one in which the relationship between writers and their booksellers and editors emphasized negotiable but clear terms of payment. Marilyn Butler has argued that we might define the essence of Romanticism not so much in its poetry, as has been usual up until

now, but rather in the emergence of the "modern journalist," exemplified in the "man of letters" who "made it his object to carry weight, to wield a kind of moral authority." Under such conditions the woman reviewer, whose work has been largely ignored, takes on importance. Like her male counterparts, women reviewers took seriously their role as, in Butler's words, "critic, watchdog and self-appointed spokes[person]," arbiter in the often contentious arena of literary taste.³ Their work offers opportunities to reassess periodical literary journalism, a form of writing burdened with unexamined over-generalizations about reviewer aptitude, dedication, and impartiality – about, in other words, reviewer professionalism – that has fared poorly in twentieth-century literary scholarship. Literary periodicals including reviews were at the center of some of the most momentous changes in the history of literary culture, changes in which women played an inadequately recognized part.

Part II examines periodical literary criticism by Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, Anna Letitia Barbauld, Elizabeth Moody, and Harriet Martineau. Contributing to three Dissenter-operated literary reviews, the *Analytical Review*, the *Monthly Review*, and the *Monthly Repository*, these women all depended on the culture of English middle-class Rational Dissent for support and encouragement, for the foundations of their critical views, and for their business contacts. Their aesthetic judgment shows engagement in the values of sympathy, benevolent affection, and a morality based in sensibility, values that were widespread in Romantic-era British culture, but that held special meaning for the Dissenting community. Moreover, these women's reviews provide an index to the evolution from a Romantic-era notion of morality inspired by sensibility as the essential quality of the British subject to the emphasis on secular reform that dominates the tone of periodical journalism during the early Victorian age.

The careers of these women reviewers extend from the first professional woman reviewer to the period that saw the woman journalist become an increasingly common phenomenon. Such a transformation in periodical literary culture must be one of the most remarkable events of the Romantic era. The following chapters will uncover structures and ideas that made such an unprecedented change possible. At the same time, they will reassess reviewing as an occupation that placed a few women writers at the vanguard of determining British literary taste.